

Ex Daft Punk Musician Thomas Bangalter: Becoming Human/Process of Becoming Human

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Music: Despite hiding his face behind a mask for more than 20 years, Thomas Bangalter became one of the most well-known popstars in the world with the band Daft Punk. Now he is showing his face – and reinventing himself as a musician. (Translated from the article by Jurek Skrobala)

In the top floor of a Parisian apartment, reachable through a narrow lift and a wooden spiral staircase, a helmet lies on a shelf. It is a helmet that covers the entire head, with a wide visor and a slit at the height of the mouth. It looks puzzling, as though a robot set down its head and then forgot it. The helmet lies in the apartment of Thomas Bangalter. For more than 20 years Bangalter wore such helmets, as one part of the greatest faceless pop duos in the world: Daft Punk.

Daft Punk is a band not tied to a face, but to many hits. “Around the World”, “One More Time”. Since the mid 90s, Thomas Bangalter and Guy-Manuel de Homem Christo sampled forgotten soul, funk, and disco treasures to make contemporary dance music. They cut building blocks out of old songs and inserted them into new ones; machine-composed earworms. Kanye West, who had not yet drifted off yet, then sampled these songs, in “Stronger” - also a hit. And the “Happy” singer Pharrell Williams sang the Grammy winning song “Get Lucky” for Daft Punk.

In a time of social media that was already shaped by the celebrity cult, paparazzi photos, and closeups of the rich and beautiful, Daft Punk declared DJs popstars; the man in the background became a master of ceremony who opened new possibilities with his technology. Digital technology already seemed to be larger-than-life, but was not yet perceived as dangerous.

Daft Punk performed as helmet-wearing robots and didn’t show their faces. Although it was clear rather quickly who was behind the helmets, Daft Punk understood that a large part of the charm of art and entertainment lay in riddles, in hard-to-answer questions, and in spaces where there is room for interpretation. Room for imagination.

It could have continued like this. Daft Punk succeeded in being relevant and mysterious over decades. In 2017 they had a number-one-hit with Canadian singer The Weeknd, “Starboy”. But in 2021 it was suddenly over.

On the 22nd of February, Daft Punk posted a video on Youtube titled “Epilogue”. In the video, one of the Daft Punk robots explodes, while the other walks into the sun; the band break up. And then, silence.

Now, two years later, one Daft Punk returns, alone and without a helmet. Thomas Bangalter has brought out a solo album, the first after the breakup. It has nothing to do with the electronic

music that made Daft Punk famous. “Mythologies” is an orchestral work. Ballet music, of all things.

Bangalter, 48, with thinning hair and a full, tousled beard, sits in front of the shelf bearing his helmet in his study. The English of the Parisian is soft, like his gestures. When he speaks with emphasis, he balls his hand to a fist without it appearing threatening. When speaking of anonymity, a huge part of Daft Punk, he carefully forms a dome with his hands. He is not recognized on the streets, he says. His sweater is baggy, his pants hang loose, he is relaxation himself. A normal guy, not a star. Just as if he were still depending on the helmet, that used to define his public appearance.

The helmet on the shelf was gifted to him by a fan. The original helmets are stored in California, where Bangalter owns a home and from where the legacy of Daft Punk is managed. Bangalter’s present lies in Paris. His study is part of an apartment he shares with his partner, the well-known actress Elodie Bouchez, their sons Tara-Jay and Roxan, and the golden retriever Sunny.

A movie poster with Bouchez hangs at the Saint-Germain boulevard, nearby lie trash bags; France is under strike. Whistles and cowbells echo through the streets of the neighborhood; a protest. In the street where the apartment lies you can hear the suitcases of the tourists. But up here in the study, you hear none of this. An amplifier hums, barely audible. Bangalter turns it off.

He had asked himself, what he as a musician can express without the use of machines. “Could I have been a composer in another time, one in which technology did not play as large of a role?” he asks. “Was I just a byproduct of the technology of the time?”

While Daft Punk wore the robot helmets as symbols of utopia, the robotic appears increasingly dystopian today, especially now where artificial intelligence is becoming more powerful. The helmets no longer fit as well into a positive pop message.

The changed perspective on technology are apparently also part of the reason for the end of Daft Punk. Bangalter expresses this, although not directly. The question of what reasons led to the breakup of the band don’t seem very exciting for him. When asked to name just a few of them, he appears unwilling. He breathes out loudly. Pauses. “Mhm”. Pause. “Ah”. Pause. “I think to name a few would not do the situation justice.”

He says the end had long been part of the thought process. He compares it to the still-popular television series “Friends”, which ended after 10 seasons. “Many people love this series”, says Bangalter. “They wish, there had been 11, 12, 13, 14, 15 seasons. But it makes sense that it is the way it is; there is a beginning, a middle, and an end.”

He looks back on Daft Punk as characters, he says. Perhaps not out of a sitcom, but an animated movie or superhero story. For director Bangalter, the story of Daft Punk has been told, and he has already finished filming his next project; that’s what it sounds like.

Bangalter does not give a tour through his apartment, but through his study, a place of inspiration for him, he says. The study is decorated with thick picture books. About Hollywood, about Walt Disney movies. About directors like Stanley Kubrick, another one of the great puzzle-makers.

In a vitrine stand multiple Daft Punk Grammys next to photos of Bangalter with friends and family. Baby pictures of him, him at the side of his father, who became somewhat well-known in Europe in the 70s as a producer and songwriter. Him with his deceased mother, a dancer, who previously worked at the Parisian Theatre de la Ville.

Bangalter grew up surrounded by artists. His aunt was a dancer, his uncle was a choreographer. At six he learned to play piano, and his teacher was employed by the Parisian Opera. The music, the ballet, everything was already there, but the path to becoming a DJ star was far from predestined.

To the right of the vitrine should be a door that leads from the elevator and the spiral staircase to the study, but it appears that there is only a wall. "A secret door" says Bangalter. Security and secrecy are both very close to him.

Prior to Thomas Bangalter and Guy-Manuel de Homem-Christo creating their own pop mythology, they tried out as a rock band. They met as students in Paris and founded the group "Darlin'" at the start of the 90s.

In a criticism of the British musical magazine "Melody Maker", at the time when music magazines still had something to say, Darlin' was described as "daft" and "punky". Like dumb punk. A scathing criticism, but a good band name.

Bangalter and Guy-Man, as he calls his ex-colleague (as though he were a superhero like Batman), hung up their guitars, but not the music. Techno arrived in France a bit later, but the two friends were obsessed with the trend, bought a mixing table, two record players, and started experimenting. Bangalter cut his hair short.

The first Daft Punk album, "Homework", released in 1997 and containing the hit "Around The World", sold millions of times. It was a bow before and a tribute to disco, just as the later albums "Discovery" in 2001 and "Random Access Memories" in 2013 were. A tribute to the kind of music Bangalter's father had made. A personal project.

The "Homework" album already featured masks. In the music video to "Around The World", the dancers are dressed as skeletons and mummies, and the main character in the video to single "Da Funk" is in a dog costume. Bangalter and Homem-Christo wore black bags over their heads, then scary masks, and finally the robot helmets. "I can go to the backer and pick my nose while waiting in line," said Homem-Christo once. "It's cool".

Daft Punk renounced the whole celebrity show by simply not showing themselves. They did not participate. Bangalter says he didn't even use a smartphone for several years, in order to better concentrate.

The project on which he has been recently focusing is composition. It might seem strange at first that Bangalter is now a composer for orchestral music for a ballet now, a ballet that was first performed last year. At second glance, however, it seems like the next step of an artistic evolution that has always been moving further and further away from machines. As an expression of the fact that the project with the machines is, for now, ended, and that something new has begun. The process of becoming human.

"Homework" and "Discovery" used samples often. The foundation of the big "Discovery" hit, "One More Time", is built from pieces of the 70s discotrack "More Spell on You" by Eddie Johns, for example. The beats came from computer drums.

"Random Access Memories" used only few samples in 2013. The songs now had a studio band, belonging to the disco-icon Nile Rodgers. The beats now came primarily from studio drummers. The regulator for "human" was turned up.

"Mythologies", Bangalter's solo album with the ballet music, was created entirely without samples. It is based on the 52 musicians of the National Bordeaux Aquitaine orchestra.

But, similarly to how Daft Punk showed their reverence for Disco, Bangalter is now bowing before orchestral musicians and composers like Modest Mussorgski. In the most beautiful moments, this goes beyond mere tribute. Bangalter mixes musical history with the urgency and insistence of the present. Like in the last piece, "La guerre", in which the strings remind one of sirens.

And, similar to Daft Punk's "Around The World", "Mythologies" works best if one sees the accompanying dance. The choreography by Angelin Preljocaj, in which the dancers perform a multitude of human emotions; they fight, crawl, and kiss each other. This partially seems an homage to Bangalter's mother, just as Daft Punk sometimes seemed an homage to his father.

On the 22nd of February, 2021, the day on which the Daft Punk helmets became history, Bangalter was in southwest France with his family at the beach, he says. To describe his feelings on this day, he chooses an image. A personal one, and a mysterious one.

On that day, he felt like his son Tara-Jay, who had once watched the film "Mary Poppins", says Bangalter. "At the end, he cried. Even though the end of "Mary Poppins" has a happy end."

